

The Chief Religions of the World.

A series of lectures on the great religious of ancient and modern times, delivered by Dr. JOHN CAIRD, DR. MALCOLM TAYLOR, and other eminent Scotch divines has been reprinted in book form by the Scribners under the collective title of *The Faiths of the World*. The noteworthy feature of the series is that, while some of them evince a more than ordinary knowledge of the subject matter, all are written from the point of view of an orthodox theologist. Under these circumstances special weight will be attached to the admission that, touching the different religions, the speakers are examining and their points of likeness to Christianity. The usefulness of the volume consists mainly in the fact that it speaks to a audience not easily reached by writers who treat the same theme in a purely scientific way. Dr. John Caird, the principal classmate of every contributor, in the two lectures on the religions of India. In the essay on Brahmanism he insists that neither its religion nor its ethics can be intelligently studied without a distinct apprehension of the pantheistic idea of God which, from a very early period, rooted itself in the Hindu thought. He says that "in almost all of these terms to which the vaguest and most contradictory meanings are attached, a popularly used, the term seems to stand for the doctrine which identifies the material world with God. All things and beings, material and spiritual, organic and inorganic, plants and animals, and man himself, are all of them in their immediate being, parts of the divine nature. But this is not the pantheism which is observed to dominate the course of Brahmanic thought. The pantheism of India is not the doctrine of the identity, rather the nothingness of the world of sense and sight, and its loss in the feeling of the fleeting, unsubstantial character of the visible world, and the demand which arises in the mind for a real and abiding object of trust. At first sight, the logical outcome of such a pantheistic creed would seem to be a religion of indifference to all things whose highest aim would be union with the Deity by abstraction from the world. A Dr. Caird shows in a lecture upon Buddhism that this was in fact the direction in which the religious and moral life of India did actually develop. Yet, of old, the Hindu religion, in its exterior side of Brahmanic religion and morality took a line which, upon a superficial view might seem inconsistent with its pantheistic basis. While the Brahmanic sage attempted a religion of abstraction, by the abnegation of all definite thought, the Hindu people, in an indeterminate essence behind the world which he took for God, the popular mind, which never can rest in abstractions, would by an irresistible necessity take the other direction, and, in the process of defining nothing, would defy every other work, on that aspect of the Brahmanic creed according to which no one thing or being is more remote from God than another. It is in this way that Dr. Caird accounts for the futile and indiscriminate veneration of the Hindu for the gods, and for the prevalence of the phenomena, which is the characteristic trait of the popular Hindu mythology. This defective morality of Brahmanism is explained on the ground that the hidden logic of pantheism leads not merely to an ascetic morality, but to an ethics of indifference to all things, fatalistic morality—a theme of ethics which sanctions or tolerates the vices that spring from the natural desires. Moral distinctions tend to disappear in a religion which conceives of God as no nearer to the pure heart than to the wicked, and as having no other than the same appetites. To the operation of the same fatalistic principle is referred the establishment and perpetuation of the caste system. This institution is simply the fixation and hardening of social inequalities and an arbitrary distinction between the different classes. At first sight, indeed, a religion which finds God in all things and beings alike might be expected to break down artificial barriers and soften class divisions. Such was, indeed, the tendency of the Buddhist offshoot from the Brahmanic faith. But the Hindu pantheism fixed the pantheistic conception of the deity and opened a propensity to consecrate existing facts to petty accidental differences and inequalities into permanent and inviolable divisions, and to extend over the whole organization of society the iron rule of fatalistic indifference. The result of this institution was to turn into a dogma which ought to be, and commonly is, the deepest and widest principle of union between man and man, into a principle of discordance. It is no wonder, therefore, that a reaction should arise in India against a religion which so outraged the profoundest instincts of man's spiritual nature.

How that reaction found expression under the guidance of a great religious reformer is described by Dr. Caird in his lecture upon Buddhism. It was a significant fact that the Buddhist faith was not a religion of asceticism, but to the military caste, and the principal purpose of the religion he effected is defined in his maxim that "not by birth, but by his action alone, does one become low caste or a Brahman." Dr. Caird recognizes in Buddhism the first step toward an ethical religion, and the first of Nirvana to which it pointed as the ultimate goal of endeavor, the way by which it taught man to reach that end was simply that of inward purity and goodness. No creed, no formal ritualistic observance was requisite. Headmistress of the world, the Buddhist faith, in its religion, which the world has ever seen has no religion, accentuated morality and duty as entering into the very essence of worship. There can be, he perceives, no question that the relatively pure and elevated ethics taught and exemplified by the Buddhist faith, no placed first among the causes to which we may ascribe the comparatively successful success which the Indian evangelist achieved in his own day, and the deep hold which his system has retained on eastern Asia through succeeding ages. But does there not remain the fact that the change inconsistent between the moral teaching and the religion and his theological doctrine of persistent striving after self-effacement in Nirvana? May it be, by softening its hardships, to make life less intolerable, or more sweet, to those whose highest virtue is to cease to care for the things of this world, and to devote the culture of a nature not merely destined to speedy extinction, but whose highest aspiration is to be extinguished? We cannot say that Dr. Caird tries to clear away the difficulty he has suggested, neither does he attempt to show that the Buddhist faith is a religion which almost wholly extirpated Buddhism from the Indian peninsula. History presents, indeed, no puzzle more inscrutable than the fact that an institution so repulsive to the instincts and aspirations of humanity as the caste system, should have received an apparently fatal blow in the teaching of Buddhism, yet should have ultimately reasserted its authority over a large fraction of the human race.

In his discussion of the ancient religion of Persia, the Rev. John Milne dwells at length on the singularly virile morality inculcated by the Mazdean faith. Few scriptures are less sanctified and more unimpaired than the Avesta, and the Mazdean's idea of the resurrection glorified man's body as his eternal companion, and his view of heaven, presenting a continuance of the present life, made it man's first object to do well in his present existence. Mazdeism was a system of doing, not dreaming. It brushed aside the misty and dimming shadows of superstition which had so reduced the Oriental mind, and gave man's life on earth a meaning by regarding it as a combat leading to victory or evil. Notwithstanding some appearances, Mazdeism was not a cruel religion; its sacrifices were rarely, if ever, bloody. The ordinary punishments for sin were commutable into money. Almsgiving was even more strictly enjoined and sedulously practiced than it now is among the Mussulmans. No virtue of the ancient Persians, however, more astonished the double-tongued Greek historians than the reverence for truthfulness, which to that day commands the highest respect of Indians dealing with Persians. The religious law reckoned severely with the breaker of an engagement and debt or other

[illegible][illegible][illegible][illegible][illegible][illegible]